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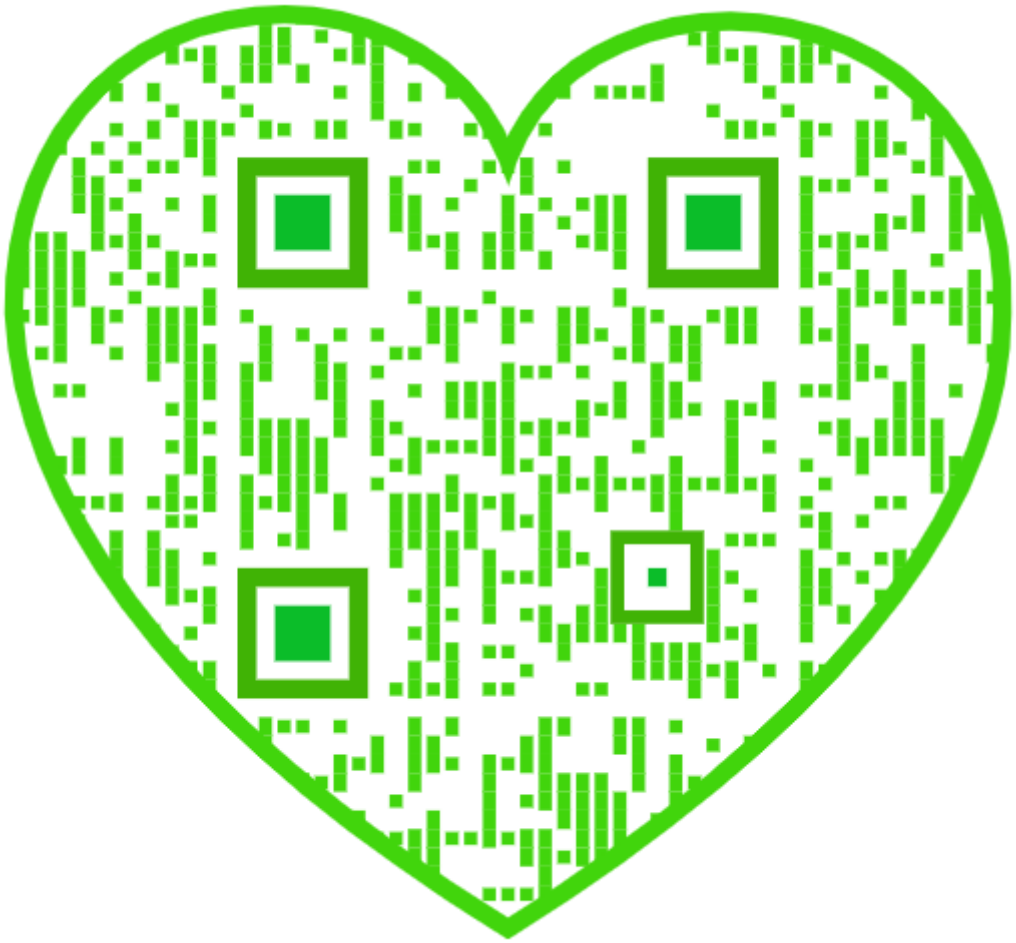

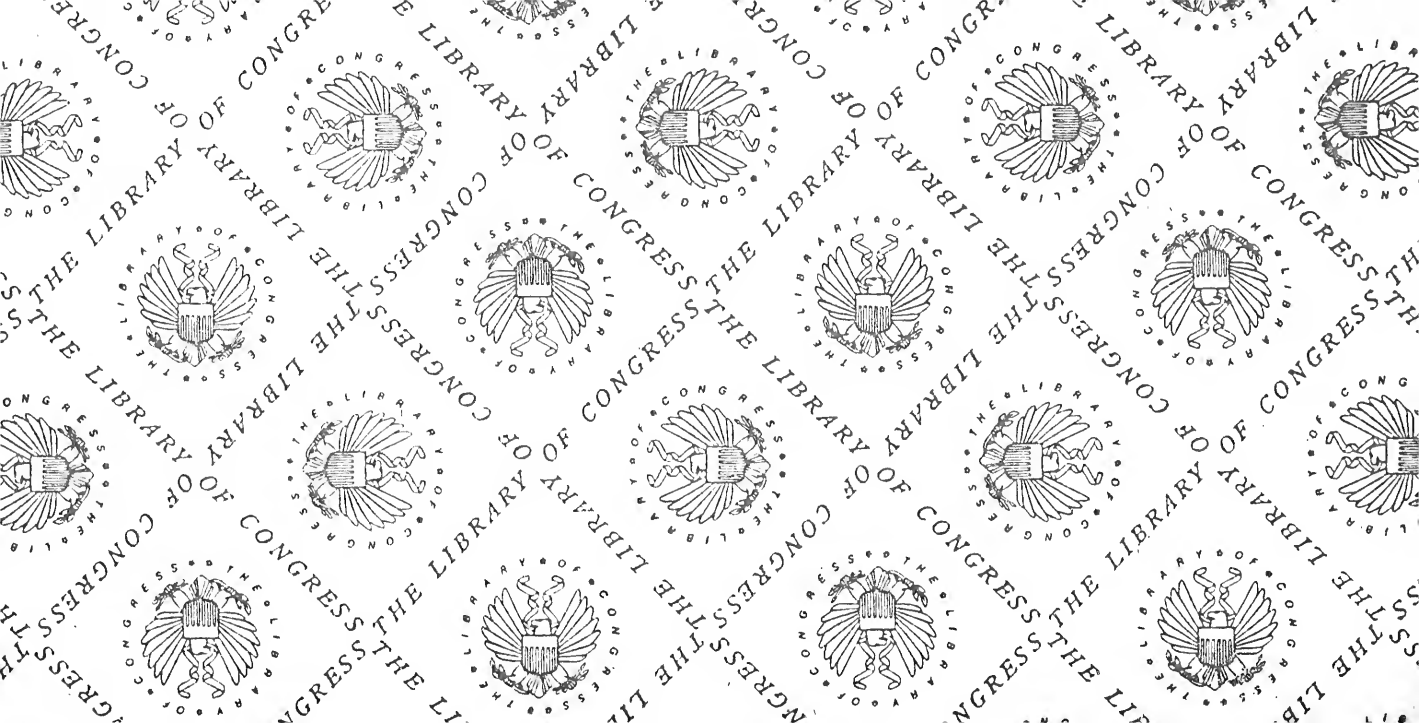
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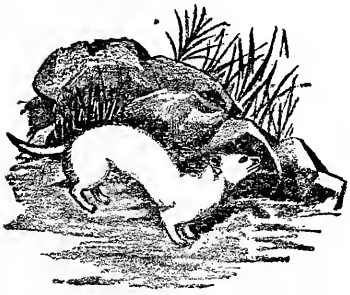
The Weasel

E. M. BARNUM

WEASELS

Trapping, Raising and Preparing Skins for Market



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INTRODUCTION.

Until the last few years the more valuable fur-bearers have been so numerous that very little attention has been paid to the weasel. Except when one was found robbing the farmer's hen roost no one ever tried to trap them, and when the hard-working trapper found one in his mink or marten set it was promptly thrown to one side with a curse.

Lately, prices of all furs have come up to such an extent that even the common animals have decreased greatly. The weasel alone seems to be holding his own, having but few enemies and plenty of food. The price offered for his pelt is now drawing more attention towards him.

Having seen so many queries about their habits and the methods of capture in a certain magazine (H.-T.-T.), I thought that the following facts which I have gathered would interest many:

E. M. B.

CHAPTER I.

THE WEASEL.

This little animal is the smallest member of the Marten family, to which nearly all the smaller valuable fur-bearers of the United States and Canada belong. They have a strong odor peculiar to all the members of the same family.

There is said to be about fifteen species of weasel, but there is very little difference between them. Nearly all the weasels turn white when the winters are cold enough, although I am sure that there are a few that do not. I have taken weasels from my traps in the middle of winter and the fur for the most part was dark brown and showed no signs of turning, while six weeks before that all the weasels caught were prime and white.

The change in color is due to the weather, as white weasels are not found where the winters are very mild. The fur does not bleach and become white, as some suppose, but is gradually shed after the white coat underneath is well started. A complete change of color may take place in about ten days. The original fur remains on the tip of the tail, which is always jet black, and the under side of the body, which

is white or light yellow always. Just before the brown fur is shed, the fur underneath has the appearance of the so-called "cotton mink." Weasels vary greatly in size, even those in the same litter. I have caught them measuring from ten to twenty inches from tip to tip. As a rule the males are the largest. They are very thin and muscular and can go into any hole through which they can get their head. They can also climb exceedingly well, being able to go almost anywhere a squirrel can.

THE DEN.

The weasel is not very particular about the den, and very often does not dig its own. I have found their dens in almost every place possible, such as old barns, haystacks, brush piles, gopher holes, and, once, in the skeleton of a horse. As a rule they have at least two or three entrances to the den, and so it is hard to capture a full grown weasel by digging it out. This is not always the case, however, as on May 8, 1909, my dog found a den in the center of an open field. There was but one passageway leading to the nest, which was but eighteen inches under ground, and the dog dug the young weasels out very quickly. There were six of them, all packed tightly in the den, which was not lined in any way with grass or leaves,

as is generally the case. They did not seem at all frightened and made no attempt to get away when I picked them up.

The young are born about the first of March and are blind for about six weeks. When two months old they are about two-thirds grown and as soon as they are able to hunt for themselves they leave the den and take up life in some other territory, as they seldom stay together.

CHAPTER II.

THE WEASEL IN CAPTIVITY.

If they are captured before they have left their den, one will have little or no trouble in raising the weasel in confinement. A pen eight feet long by three feet wide and two feet high will be plenty large enough for a family of six weasels. They make no attempt to gnaw out, but will be apt to tunnel out underground if not prevented. The meshes in the wire used in the enclosure should not be more than ¾ of an inch in diameter, as the weasels can go through a very small hole. Their yard should be about six feet long by three wide. The nest box should be about a foot and a half each way and well ventilated, but dark, and in summer should be kept as cool and shady as possible. It is of great importance that the box is kept

dry. As to nesting material, wood excelsior is best, but if it is scarce or hard to get, hay or straw does very well. Very little material is required in summer, as the animals are very apt to sweat. However, in winter, plug up some of the ventilating holes and make the box as warm as you can. Weasels are very cleanly and it is necessary to clean only one corner of their cage. Be sure that you keep drinking water where they can get it for they drink a good deal.

I never handle my animals very much and never without gloves, although they never have bitten me. If well treated and not frightened they soon become tame and will feed from the hand.

FOOD.

As regards feeding, I will say that while the animals, of course, prefer raw meat, they will eat almost anything given them and the following list will give some idea as to the variety of tbeir diet. The list is given in about the order that they prefer them:

Rabbits, mice, small birds, meat scraps, grasshoppers, sweet corn, eggs, muskrats frogs, small snakes, and anything on the order of beetles and butterflies. They should be fed only as much at a time as they will at once clean up. Meat should be cut up in

order that each one will get his share and to prevent them from fighting.

Of course, they like best of all to kill their food and they have no trouble in doing so after they have tried it a few times. A weasel will soon get so that he can kill a large barn rat very quickly and without getting a scratch in return.

The rat is always seized back of the neck and the more he throws the weasel around the more the weasel seems to like it. The victim is not released until all the blood is sucked from its body. While some people say that a weasel will break a large egg and suck it, none of my animals would do this unless the eggs were first cracked for them. After a large meal they will always curl up for a long sleep.

CHAPTER III.

TRAPPING.

Unlike most animals that have been trapped much for their fur, the weasel is not a bit trap-shy. They will enter an uncovered trap as readily as a skunk or muskrat. Almost any good trap will do to catch him, but the three that I use altogether are the common steel jaw trap, the wire rat trap (when I want to capture one alive), and

lastly, the wooden rat trap that snaps and catches them by the head.

I use the first kind mostly, because a skunk and even a mink very often happen along, and this trap will always hold them. Almost any good make will do, but I think that the Hawley & Morton is the best of the cheaper traps. The 1½ size nearly always kills the weasel, as they have a wider spread of jaw and catch them higher up. However, they are much more expensive than the No. 1 size, require more pressure to set them off and can not be set in as small a hole. Even with the No. 1 size the animal is nearly always killed and is always caught so high up that it can not escape. Before setting steel traps for white weasels be sure that the inner jaws are free from rust. It would do all right to wrap them with strips of paper or cloth. If the jaws are rusty they will leave rust marks where they hit, which it is almost impossible to remove.

In setting traps they should be set as lightly as possible, as a weasel is not very heavy. Weasels travel almost as much in the day time as they do at night. They nearly always return to the den which they left to sleep. In a night's wandering they will sometimes travel a distance of three or four miles, usually in a circle. They are

very keen scented and they will often stop short on the trail and go a number of feet to one side to dig up a mole or a mouse which they had scented. Anyone can very easily distinguish their tracks when they can be plainly seen. When he travels at his usual gait the weasel takes leaps about three feet long, leaving two little marks about two inches apart. The claw marks do not show, as the feet are very furry. In running the front feet move quite independently of the hind feet, which hop. In the winter when the swamps are frozen over, weasels travel over them hunting for the mice that live in the thick grass. When a swamp of this kind is handy it is a sure place to set a trap.

If one of their runways can be found, a steel trap should be set and a branch or some other obstruction placed so that the weasel will jump in the trap and not over it as he might otherwise do. Bait need not be used here unless the weasels have not been traveling the runway much. If you wish to be more certain of a catch a mouse or rabbit would be fine for bait. If no suitable runway or hole can be found to set the trap in make a pen with flat stones or boards just large enough for a trap, and bait. Have one end open and have the top high enough to let the trap work freely. In this set

either a steel trap, or a snap trap may be used. All traps where bait is used should be taken care of often, as the meat is eaten in a few days by field mice..

After the set is complete it may be concealed by throwing over it some dead grass or a piece of brushwood. While, as before mentioned, the weasel is not afraid of an uncovered trap, and there are signs of mink or skunk around conceal the trap as well as possible and the chances are good for landing one of them. For this reason a steel trap ought to be used around such places and it should not be smaller than a number one size. Weasels run through every hollow log along their trail and the trapper should never pass such a place without setting a trap. Put a trap at each end and stake them to the log. Throw a piece of bait into the log and the set is complete.

In trapping for weasels I never set a trap under water, nor where it is apt to be flooded, as the weasel never enters the water if he can help it. All traps should be staked solidly. Whenever able to do so place the enclosures where they will not drift over with snow, and with the open side to the south. When a trap is set at a hole that goes straight into the ground, bank up around the sides of the trap, so that the ani-

mal, in going in and out of the hole, will be forced to pass over the trap. In this part of the country (Illinois) most of the holes are of this kind, so I use this set more often than any. In order to make a trail that the weasels can follow to the traps, most trappers usually drag a piece of rabbit or some such bait by a piece of string to where the trap is set. The traps are set about one hundred and fifty yards apart and when the animal strikes this trail he follows it to the nearest trap and the rest is easy.

The weasel may always be found around plowed fields where it lives off the mice and birds found there. They may easily be caugbt with just a few traps by making a trail around the field and putting down a couple of traps. Weasels like to run along in ditches by the roadside. In places of this kind bait pens are very good. If the road is frequently traveled set the trap in a place where people in passing by are not liable to see or hear the weasel when it is in the trap. It is not necessary to put the trap in the ditch for the animal can smell the bait easily if it is placed twenty or thirty feet to one side.

Where meat bait is used do not fail to put it in the back part of the pen where it can't be seen, or else cover it over with

grass or something, otherwise the crows or jays will take it and muss up the set, as they did with mine until I concealed the bait. When I set a trap where I have seen the tracks of a weasel I never pull the trap up for at least ten days or two weeks, as they very seldom travel the same route two days in succession. I have found hollow logs, tiles, stone fences and ditches that were traveled every night although there were more than one weasel using them.

They may be taken alive with either one of the various kinds of box traps or the common wire rat trap. When I use the wire trap I cover it completely with small sticks an inch and a half or two inches in diameter, leaving only the opening of the trap showing and the set has much the appearance of a pile of wood. The weight that is used to balance the door on these traps is sometimes so heavy that a small weasel cannot spring the door and it is necessary to replace the weight with a lighter one.

The box trap is fully as good as the wire one in every way, but it takes quite a little time to make one that will work properly. It is best to make traps out of weathered boards as they will not show up so plainly. A box fourteen inches long and six inches square is plenty large enough. Have

a sliding door and the trigger should be in the back of the box. It is very important that there are air holes in a box trap, otherwise the animal would soon smother. The weasel is not very apt to gnaw out of a carefully made trap, but if the trap is not looked after within a day after he is caught he might harm himself.

Weasels are very easily poisoned when they will eat bait, but they always travel quite a distance before they die, and other animals than the ones it is intended for are so liable to get the poison that this method of taking them is very seldom used. When one has been found killing chickens and it is not the fur that is wanted, it may be poisoned by chopping meat into small pieces and poisoning it with a very small quantity of arsenic, cyanide of potash or other poison and placing the meat under a shed or in a hole so the dog or chickens cannot reach it. It very often happens that where the winters are mild and there seems to be a number of weasels around, judging from the tracks, they are hard to catch and will not take bait. This is due to the fact that they are getting as much food as they need and they refuse fo be attracted by dead bait; or, if they do so it is just out of curiosity and not for the want of a meal. When this is

the case it is best to try some kind of scent. There is quite a number of these scents on the market but very few of them are of any account. The three that I have used with the most success are fish oil, which may be made at home, oil of anise, which can be bought at any drug store, and a scent put up by Funsten Bros. & Co., St. Louis, Mo. The first two that I mentioned are the cheapest and work very well, but I have had much better success with that made by the Funstens and shall continue to use it. The traps are set in exactly the same way when using scent that they are when trapping with bait. To use the scent a few drops can be put on a piece of rabbit skin or a twig dipped in it can be put where the weasel will have to cross the trap to get to it. This bait will require renewing every week or so, especially in cold weather.

During the winter months the weasels run about nearly every night and in a heavy blizzard or snow storm they are sure to be out as they are not bothered by the cold. They do not travel about as much in thawing or rainy weather.

When setting traps they should always be placed where there is no chance of the animal jumping over them. When the weasel is going at his usual gait he touches

the ground in such few places compared to most animals, that it would be very easy for him to miss a single trap set in his runway, whether he knew it was there or not. This is one of the reasons why a trap set in a small hollow log or a hole is more successful than one put down most any place in a runway, unless it is set so that the weasel will have to run into it. This may be done by placing twigs or pranches in such a way that the weasel will light in the trap in jumping over them.

CHAPTER IV.

PREPARING THE SKINS,

Very often a weasel will become very badly soiled from struggling in a trap and it requires a good deal of cleaning before the skin is removed. This is easily done by washing the animal in warm water, using a little soap. The water should not be hot, as it tends to loosen the fur, causing it so shed. Washing the fur in the above manner does not harm it in any way, but greatly improves its appearance, which, of course, adds to the value of the pelt. After washing the animal let it dry perfectly before commencing to skin it.

First cut off all four feet about half way up to the body. Starting with the hind

legs run a sharp knife under the skin on the back side of the legs, continuing the cuts until they meet at the base of the tail. The next and for some the most difficult step, is to remove the tail bone. To do this it is sometimes necessary to split the tail an inch and a half or so on the under side. If this is done carefully there is no danger of pulling the fur off. After the bone is removed commence skinning the body, using the knife when needed, but being careful not to cut the fur. The skin should be turned inside out and pulled toward the head as fast as it is loosened, so that the fur side will not get soiled by coming in contact with the flesh. The only other place where there is liable to be any trouble is the head, around the ears and eyes.

The knife will have to be used here. When the ears and eyes show under the skin cut them as close to the head as possible.

Weasels skinned in this way will not be cut open on the under side, and it will reduce the value of the skin if it is cut open. There is not much fat on a weasel and if it is carefully skinned there will not be any on the skin after it is removed. If there is any it may be removed by scraping the skin with a dull knife after it is stretched. I stretch my furs by pulling them over small thin

boards with the fur side next to the wood. The stretchers taper enough to conform with the shape of the skin, so that it can be stretched uniformly. My large boards are 2¼ inches at the shoulder and 3 inches at the base. The medium size are 2 inches at the shoulder and 2½ inches at the base, and the small ones are 1 3-4 inches at the shoulder and 2¼ inches at the base.

The edges are rounded to prevent the fur from tearing when pulling it from the board. The fur may be taken off the stretcher after it has been on two days. No salt of any kind is needed to preserve the skins if they are trapped in the winter, and the fur dealers do not like to buy salted pelts.

There seems to be no especially good way to remove the yellow stain found on the under side of so many weasels and it still shows after the furs are made up.

The better quality of white fur has been quoted during the last few years at from 25 cents to 75 cents; short or stained skins less.

Most of the fur houses will not pay anything for the brown weasels, and those that do buy them never pay more than five or ten cents.

I will be glad to explain anything about weasels not made clear in this book, if when writing you will enclose a stamp for reply.

E. M. BARNUM,
LaGrange, Ill.

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